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Basil Davidson in *Turkestan Alive*:

Factual reporter in a newly “liberated” Xinjiang, or willing conduit for the Chinese revolution?

Abstract

Africanist Basil Davidson is widely believed to have helped change the view of African civilizations as “backward” to one that saw Africa as sophisticated. Yet despite being renowned for an intellectual rigour developed as an investigative reporter, it is questionable whether Davidson brings the same objective gaze to newly “liberated” Xinjiang in the early years of China’s socialist revolution. In *Turkestan Alive* (1957), he undergoes a personal revolutionary voyage. An idealist with deep left-wing sympathies, Davidson seems to meet and quote only individuals with a success story to tell, the result of his dependence on translation and a series of linguistic and political intermediaries. The picture painted is thus largely of embrace of CCP policies of socialist construction, so that Davidson ultimately emerges as willing conduit for the Chinese revolution.

Introduction

Basil Davidson, the self-taught Africanist, was born in Bristol, England, in 1914. Hailed as “a radical journalist in the great anti-imperial tradition” and a distinguished historian of pre-colonial Africa, he authored five novels and more than 30 other books. Most are on the subject of African history, and they include several classic textbooks still in use on that continent today (Brittain 2010).¹ Davidson also made an award-winning eight-part history series for Channel 4 television, titled “Africa” (1984). Excellent on screen, he succeeded in bringing an alternative vision of Africa, far removed from the usual stereotypes of famine and corruption, to a wide audience (Brittain 2010).

Leaving school at 16, Davidson’s first job was putting up posters for Fyffe’s bananas in the North of England during the Depression; perhaps this is when his socialist principles took root. Setting his heart on journalism, in 1938 he accepted a job at *The Economist* in London (*The Telegraph* 2010). In the late 1930s he travelled widely in Italy and central Europe. When the war broke out, his familiarity with the region’s geography and his capacity to learn its languages made him an obvious candidate for recruitment to the Special Operations Executive (SOE), which sought to undermine Nazi Germany from within. Davidson fought in Yugoslavia from August 1943 to November 1944, before transferring to the Ligurian hills of northern Italy. There, he and his partisan band seized Genoa before the arrival of American or British forces (Brittain 2010). By the end of the war, Davidson was a lieutenant-colonel awarded the Military Cross and twice mentioned in dispatches. Returning to journalism, he worked for *The Times* first as a Paris-based correspondent, and then as chief foreign leader writer in London. In 1949, however, he would leave the paper, unhappy both with the western intervention that had crushed communist partisans in Greece and with the paper’s support for German rearmament. For the next three years, he assumed the post of secretary to the Union of Democratic Control (UDC), a campaigning foreign affairs

organisation set up by E. D. Morel during the First World War (Brittain 2010; *The Telegraph* 2010). At the same time, he was made special correspondent at the *New Statesman*, and potential successor to its editor, Kingsley Martin. It was thus as a journalist - not an academic - that Davidson first discovered Africa. His trenchant articles on South Africa and the British colonies he had visited would subsequently lead to his dismissal as Martin (influenced by companion Dorothy Woodman) warned Davidson he was “drawing too far to the Left” (*The Telegraph* 2010). Rescued by the *Daily Herald* (1954-57) and the *Daily Mirror* (1959-62), Davidson was encouraged to follow up the *Mirror*’s publishing activities in Nigeria. As a result, he made regular annual journeys through a west, central and east Africa on the very brink of independence from colonialism, and “was plunged deep into unwritten African history” (Brittain 2010).

Davidson had grown up in a house on Blackboy Hill, reached by way of Whiteladies Road, in the slave-dealing port of Bristol. In an obituary that explores Davidson’s lifelong obsession with Africa, the UK-based Ghanaian novelist and journalist, Cameron Duodu, ruminates: ‘Did the ghosts of “black boys” who had once entertained “white ladies” [...] play tricks with his young mind?’ (Duodu 2010). For many years, Davidson was at the centre of campaigns for Africa’s liberation from colonialism and apartheid. Enthused by the end of British colonialism and the prospects for pan-Africanism in the 1960s, he later threw himself into the reporting of the African liberation wars in the Portuguese colonies. He was also a ‘scathing critic’ of the British government’s and media’s equivocation over South Africa’s support for the white regime in Rhodesia (Brittain 2010). In 1955, when Davidson produced *The African Awakening*, most of the African continent was still under colonial rule and there was no such discipline as African history. When that subject was first taught by white lecturers in the 1960s, it covered the immediate prelude to colonial rule, the colonial period and the emergence of nationalist movements: in short, a “racist and ignorant history”

(Duodu 2010). Seeking to expound history from an African point of view, Davidson looked further back to what pre-colonial societies had achieved and, in doing so, built a reputation as the historian most trusted in Africa itself. Palestinian scholar Edward Said described Davidson as one of the few western intellectuals who had “crossed to the other side.” His critics, however, claimed he was harking back to a golden age that had never existed (*The Telegraph* 2010).

As Duodu (2010) eloquently observes, “the post-independence generation of Africans [...] needed an intellectual anchor to the political sovereignty the colonialists formally relinquished to them in the 1950s and ’60s.” Davidson taught that generation not to believe the claim of the colonisers that Africa had been “barbarous” prior to colonisation. By the time his later books, such as *The Search for Africa* (1994) were published, archaeological evidence and carbon-dating had enabled Davidson to affirm that Egyptian civilisation was rooted firmly in Black Africa, and also that it had mothered much of Greek civilisation (Duodu 2010). In Duodu’s view, the most important question Davidson answered on African history was whether Africa and Europe should be held equally guilty over the Atlantic slave trade. While acknowledging their joint involvement, Davidson contended that Europe had dominated the connection, vastly enlarged the trade, and continually turned it to European advantage. It is then small wonder that one African-American academic who read Davidson (without knowing who he was) simply assumed he was an African (Duodu 2010).

Despite Davidson’s lack of even an undergraduate degree, he was accepted as an equal by left-wing historians, including E.P. Thompson, Thomas Hodgkin, Christopher Hill and Eric Hobsbawm. Palestinian scholar Edward Said placed him in a select band of western artists and intellectuals deemed to possess a sympathy and comprehension of foreign cultures that signalled they had “crossed to the other side.” (Brittain 2010; *The Telegraph* 2010). Others’ perceptions of his left-leaning principles would however create problems for him.

During the Second World War, Davidson had worked hard to secure British support (via Churchill) for Tito's Communist partisans on the grounds that they were fighting the Germans whilst General Mihailovic's Chetniks were not. As a result, he was later targeted by some who claimed that Britain had betrayed the monarchist Chetniks (*The Telegraph* 2010). While working for the UDC and the *New Statesman*, he is said to have earned the "undying hatred" of Dorothy Woodman, who accused him of being a "fellow traveller." When later offered a job as an editor at Unesco, the British government vetoed his appointment, concerned that his articles on Africa were quoted too often in Moscow (Brittain 2010). While Davidson had apparently never been attracted to Marxism, his wartime experiences with Communist partisans had certainly coloured his general attitude towards the cold war struggle, first in Europe and later in Africa. If communists were prepared to fight against the Nazis, or later against South African apartheid and Portuguese colonialism, that caused him no problems (Brittain 2010).

Davidson's foray into China

It will be clear from the above that Basil Davidson was primarily an Africanist; yet he was also interested in conditions in other developing countries. In September 1952, a trip to China with a 30-strong British delegation resulted in the volume *Daybreak in China* (1953). Though described by *The Times* as a "first-rate piece of factual reporting," his qualified support for the Chinese revolution generated strong feelings in anti-communist quarters (Fraser 2004). In a review, one H. F. Angus complained that Davidson had frankly declared a bias in favour of what he called "China's freedom." In particular, he objected to Davidson's observations that hardship and justice to some may be outweighed by benefits to many, for example, through land reform (Angus 1954).

In 1956, Davidson was fortunate to gain access to the oasis cities of Chinese Turkestan, “the world’s most hidden country”: the result was *Turkestan Alive*, a rare piece of travel literature dating from the early years of China’s socialist revolution (inside jacket, Davidson 1957). In it the author asks himself a question: “Was Xinjiang really a part of the PRC now?” (1957, 28). In other words, to what extent had Turkic Muslims in Chinese Central Asia embraced the Chinese revolution? The publicists claim that Davidson “penetrated to the heart of the mystery,” while, for his part, the author states that previous travellers were too busy deceiving officials and dodging warlords to document the people, who emerge in their tales as “grey and white figures [...] never more than faintly seen” (18). Here, I explore the extent to which Davidson documented the “truth” about local peoples in post-Liberation Xinjiang. As Moynagh (2004) has shown, an affective engagement with political ideology on the part of the sojourner may constitute him as the subject of political tourism. In the same way, I will assess whether *Turkestan Alive* tells us more about Davidson’s ideological journey towards social consciousness, as an “intellectual traveler” (Spicer-Escalante, 2011; Fay 2011), than it reveals about the nature of the Chinese Communist “liberation”.

The intermediaries

As outlined above, when the Second World War broke out, Davidson was recruited to the UK’s Secret Intelligence Service, MI6, and parachuted into Yugoslavia. There, he “fell in love with the comradeship, the trust and the spiritual force of endurance in the service of an ideal that he found with the guerrilla fighters” (Brittain 2010). As one guerrilla leader testified, Davidson “accepted every risk and fatigue that could bring him into personal touch with the way our people live now” (“The Life of Basil Davidson” n.d.). Yet Davidson’s experience in 1950s China seems to have been rather different. Faced with geographic and

linguistic strangeness (he had no fluency in either Chinese or Uyghur), Davidson was obliged to rely on a series of linguistic and political intermediaries. These included the Chinese Association of Journalists (CAJ); the PRC Chargé d’Affaires in London; two Han academics at the Central Institute for Nationalities in Beijing; a Miss T’eng and Mr Chen from the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs; a Mr Hung from the foreign affairs department of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region government; Tse Yun, a reporter and junior official of the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Mamud, a Uyghur interpreter “attached” to him by the Kashgar city administration; and Ma Hai-teh (alias George Hatem), an American physician who had “joined his life’s cause to the Chinese revolution” in 1935, and now specialised in skin and venereal diseases in the Xinjiang grasslands (9; 202-3). Davidson acknowledges “a great debt” to these individuals, especially to his companion, interpreter and “staunch friend of many miles,” Tse Yun, adding the caveat: “None of them [...] is responsible for what I have written; nor necessarily agrees with it” (9, 11). Yet examination of the pages that follow suggests otherwise, as it emerges that much of the author’s itinerary was orchestrated by representatives of the Chinese state.

Upon his arrival in Beijing, Davidson is met by Miss T’eng and delivered to the Pei-fang Hotel, conveniently located beside the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Two days later, he is asked by Mr Chen of the Information Department where he wishes to go in Xinjiang (36-38; 50); while Chen considers his requests, Miss T’eng arranges his local visits, translating his questions as well as local people’s responses. It is thus at least partly through Miss T’eng’s eyes that Davidson forms his first impression of the “building of the new” in socialist China, exclaiming: “The changes in social order and individual outlook [...] are not to be seen [...] anywhere else in the world” (39). During a visit to a state goldfish farm, Davidson describes Miss T’eng as making “orderly interpretations of orderly answers,” while official Hsin Ch’ing delivers “solid facts” with “a running fire of slogans.” He further notes

that this official speaks “with a slow, flat deliberation and a slight frown” (43) – a circumstance that arguably belies spontaneity and genuineness of response. Ultimately, however, Davidson accepts the “facts” he is given.

In Lanzhou (as later in Ürümchi), Davidson and Tse Yun stay in a newly built luxury hotel, filled with journalists, Soviet engineers and government officials (thus not exactly “living with the people,” as Davidson had done in Europe) (55). Here, the author admires how interpreter Tse could “shear through the propaganda slogans to the facts beneath” (52). Yet Tse’s ability to win the trust of strangers seems questionable as it emerges that while “most interpreters either fall silent at tricky moments, or else launch into round-about explanations [...] Tse [...] would peer sternly at any recalcitrant interviewee and pound the man with questions of his own” (70).

In south Xinjiang, Davidson is dependent on his Uyghur interpreter Mamud, described as a “modernizer” who wears a flat blue cap (184). Such a person may be expected to espouse socialist ideas (remember, too, that he was selected for the role by the Kashgar city administration). Mamud is asked to explain what Davidson tells him he has seen (143), a process potentially leading to Chinese whispers (where a message is passed from person to person, causing errors to accumulate). We are reminded of Hsin Ch’ing at the goldfish farm as Davidson describes how Mamud “would frown and push back his Stalin-Siberian cap [...] whenever he felt that an exact translation was difficult but important.” The author does acknowledge the possibility that the intermediary may sometimes add a twist all his own, as when Mamud describes a Uyghur trader who allowed his wife to attend a newly established adult literacy school as “a progressive man.” Yet Davidson’s will to believe usually overrides his skepticism, as it also does here: “This last was certainly Mamud’s gloss, but the general sense of it was probably right enough” (194-5).

Romanticising revolution

So, whence this desire to believe in the Chinese revolution? While Davidson was not a Communist Party member, he was nonetheless very much of the Left, as his friendships and scholarly liaisons demonstrate. In the eyes of some critics, this occasionally caused his investigative rigour to lapse, as when reviewer H. F. Angus wrote of *Daybreak in China* (1953): "...to treat a few instances as a legitimate form of random sampling involves an act of faith" (Angus, 1954). "Faith" is very much in evidence in *Turkestan Alive*. Before departure, Davidson is accused by a Greek friend of "romantic vapouring" on the subject of Chinese Turkestan, which he proclaims had long held him in its dreams; once arrived, he describes himself as "hypnotized enough to admit that in this case the dreams might be less than the reality" (22, cf. 57). He is fascinated by the organisational changes brought about by socialism in Beijing, and seems unduly willing to accept what he sees and hears as social reality. On seeing notices about land reclamation in China's capital, and later spying trees planted on the frontiers he quickly concludes: "Propaganda slogans in China now are oddly liable to mean what they say" (53). Similarly, much of what he sees in Xinjiang is viewed through the lens of his personal social ideals – what he wishes would be true. He paints the region as plagued by serfdom throughout its history, at least, that is, up until the Chinese revolution in 1949. We learn that Buddhist monks in the first century AD had financed their monasteries and livings via usury, so that "only a revolutionary desire for an end to priestly servitude can explain how [egalitarian] Islam could spread so rapidly" (93). Subsequently, we are told that Islam had failed to change the landowner-peasant relationship, with its levelling effect (egalitarian values) "little more than a memory" by the time Marco Polo passed through Kashgar in the 6th century (95).

By contrast, Davidson is deeply gratified by the social transformations he finds in 1950s Xinjiang. Witness his delight at meeting a former-peasant-turned-water-delegate,

elected by the people to ensure fair distribution of water resources: “I had come here because I thought that people could after all change their circumstances [...] And here one saw that it really could be so” (102). Elsewhere, Davidson describes how an older woman at a newly established adult literacy school “threw back her veil and her good housewifely face [...] glowed with the pleasures of independence” (194). Assuming that women in Xinjiang have “through all these uncounted centuries, Islamic and pre-Islamic [...] prattled their love songs and endured”, he declares: “The revolution in Sinkiang already means a good deal to men; it will mean, perhaps, even more to women” (195).

Often, Davidson seems too eager to draw generalisations from “model examples,” to which he is invariably led by a state representative. Even when he acknowledges this – the goldfish farm was “something of a show place [...] right out on history’s wave” (48) – he continues to present what he learns there as social fact. Thus, he concludes that while the goldfish farm might be unusually successful “it is certainly not unique” (48). Dismissing pre-Liberation history *en entier* as “chronic Inner Asian chaos”, he celebrates the present for its “drive for change and renovation that now gave power to Niadze and the Water Delegate, *and to all the other Niadzes and Water Delegates of Sinkiang*” (102-3, my emphasis). In this way, he generalises out from isolated cases in a way that suggests a willing and limitless idealism. “Facts”, in the form of quantitative statistics, are doubted from time to time as propaganda of the “poods-and-roubles” sort,² and even rebuked as “capable of skinning a situation of its humanity in the shortest possible time” (191). Yet official figures on state cooperatives (39), school enrolment (74), tax reform and increased yields (233), fed to Davidson by state cadres, are subsequently offered up in unproblematic terms as proof of the revolution’s success.

An especially illuminating section allowing us to place the author’s personal values concerns his interviews about the Three Regions Revolution that took place in Ili in the 1940s, and resulted in the East Turkestan Republic (ETR, 1944-49). His attitude to this

revolution differs markedly from his position on the earlier revolution that took place in Kashgar in the 1930s, and resulted in the Turkish-Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkestan (TIRET, 1933-34).³ The difference derives from his perception that the former was based on religion and ethnicity (Pan-Turkism), while the latter was based on progressive, socialist politics. Of the ETR, he writes: "...this time the men and women would break from their obscure provincialism [...] This time it would be revolutionary as well as nationalist" (119). He notes that respondents, normally reluctant to talk about the past, are suddenly eager to talk about this period, and "launched into it with the zest and fluency of men for whom the spoken word [...] is the natural way of telling and remembering" (119). An observer might question whether this enthusiasm for the subject did not derive equally from the author's own politics, as further suggested by the title of Chapter 6 ('Red Tartary'). Here, Davidson recalls his participation in the partisan wars in Yugoslavia, comparing the Yugoslav term *junak* (hero) with the corresponding Turkestan term *batur* (120). When taken to former serf Ayip's home by his "passport," Roadze (Deputy Secretary of a cotton growing cooperative), he is reminded of how he was fed, sheltered and accepted by Yugoslav peasants as one of them, a circumstance he dubs "a matter of peasant loyalties." He finishes by observing: "It was not much different here with this revolution" (165). He is no doubt encouraged in his response by the poster of Stalin he finds on the wall of Ayip's home, the name transliterated in Chinese characters. Later, as he boards the Ferry of the Wild Horse in Kazakh territory, the memory of a chain ferry used to cross the Bosnian Sava during the winter fighting of 1943-44 leads him to reminisce: "All those wars, *those necessary wars*, were fought and done" (206, my emphasis).

The benevolent pioneers

Davidson's appreciation for the spirit of self-sacrifice embodied in the socialist cause is most evident in his descriptions of early Chinese communist pioneers. His reverence for these individuals is first suggested when he observes in Beijing "a blue-clad study group" reading a newspaper to each other in the "grateful morning light" (19). The theme is continued when the author recounts how in 1414 the Ming emperor (after proclaiming his own virtue) tells an envoy from the African kingdom of Melinda that it "behoves him to remonstrate with Us [the imperial court] about our shortcomings"; this ethos Davidson happily links to "the revival of self-criticism and criticism in revolutionary China" (24-25).

In Xinjiang, he imagines the arrival on the frontier of "a little group of Chinese communists, the first of their kind," characterising them as "a slender and heroic band" (107-8). These same CCP cadres are later credited with having "helped" Uyghur and Kazakh cultural associations to revive their own literatures (114), although these associations were actually set up in the 1930s by Chinese warlord Sheng Shicai to give credibility to his early policies on ethnic equality. By the 1940s, they had become centres for Turkic nationalism and a political problem for provincial authorities (Benson and Svanberg 1998: 67-8). But it is during his sojourn in the south that Davidson is completely convinced by the "all-consuming patience" of CCP cadres at the frontier. Speaking of the difficulties involved in trying to organize Yarkand locals into cooperatives, he describes with great respect how these men persisted in talking, arguing, persuading, and nagging, so that by 1956 not only had peasant families pooled their land (stage one) but they had also "moved on their own" to sell their land to the cooperative (stage two). All this had been achieved, declares Davidson, under "the steady, single-minded pressure of the Communist Party" (171). Of the Deputy Head of the Finance Department at the Yarkand government, he observes: "...he was as stretched to his duty and devotion as a monk," waxing lyrical on the virtues of discipline and self-denial (175). In Tekes (Kazakh country), we find him swooning at length over the attributes of the

pioneers, using words like “self-denying”, “imperturbable”, “solemn”, “tolerant”, “determined yet understanding”, “vivacious”, “respectful” and “affectionate.” He ultimately concludes that these men “represented not only revolution but also China: China the old overlord [...] but a China now that stood for equality among Chinese and non-Chinese alike” (221). This, he declares, represents “the distance between the old reality and the new reality [...] between colonial subjection and national equality” (221). Davidson also extends his admiration to some among the indigenous Party converts, as when he says of the Chairman of the Turpan town council:

A tough and incorruptible character, this Niadze, I would guess, there would be no fooling with the petty cash, no fiddling of municipal supplies. A peasant among peasants, he would speak their language, share their expectations, know their hopes and fears. He would be one of those numberless many who carried forward the Chinese revolution: another proof, if one were needed, of its deep-probing popularity. (79-80)

Yet in seeing only what he wants to see – social equality and freedom from slavery – Davidson overlooks some glaring evidence to the contrary. When another Yarkand cadre explains that CCP pioneers must be “the planks of a bridge across which knowledge can pass from those with more to those with less,” he observes simply that the man is “a little prim,” declining to recognise the core of Han ethnic chauvinism (defined as an attitude of Han cultural superiority) in this utterance (175). In Tekes, while he acknowledges that the central Politburo has recently warned of the dangers of such chauvinism (the centre was all too aware of realities in the field),⁴ he insists that Han doctors in that region “took care never to seem patronising or superior to local people” (222). Perhaps this was true; although their behaviour may have been different when he was not there to observe it. Meanwhile, the imperial self is evident in Davidson’s own attitude to frontier development, as he speaks of

the “tact and patience” shown by the CCP in “coaxing and helping [minorities] towards higher levels of economy and social life” (238).

The respondents

And so to Davidson’s respondents and the (overwhelmingly positive) data yielded by his encounters with them. As noted above, access is mostly enabled by state representatives; in addition, many respondents are themselves agents of the state.⁵ Interviews focus on the development of infrastructure (61); construction of new public buildings (67; 79-80); building of hospitals and training of medical staff (68-69; 138-40; 214-5); state cooperatives and improved yields (100; 142; 167; 170-74; 182-3; 206; 214-5); water management and distribution (128; 152-55; 162-3; 167); state support for Islam (146); the end of serfdom (167); land reform (169-71); “home rule” (that is, autonomous government) (185); tax reform (187; 214-5); and educational improvements (190-96; 213). Below, I select a few examples of meetings to make my point.

Based on the evidence presented, one might assume that local Turkic peoples had welcomed Han pioneers with open arms in the early years of the new China. What is harder to gauge is how far this represented an active embrace of socialist revolution and progressive politics, or was simply an escape from the poverty and insecurity of pre-Liberation wartime. Some of Davidson’s interviews are conducted with Han cadres, who we might reasonably expect to act as spokespersons for the Chinese revolution. We find Lu Li-shu of the Chaosu county headquarters speaking in “slow and determined” tones (again, note the absence of spontaneous response) on positive developments in yield and taxation (214-5). In a slightly more unusual scenario, we find Ma Hai-teh, the American convert to the Chinese revolutionary cause, talking about the advances made by a nomadic stockbreeder’s cooperative in Chaosu (206).

Then there are the grateful co-optees: newly appointed indigenous officials and newly trained indigenous professionals. These persons of changed fortune, who have personally benefited from China's socialist revolution, may also be expected to give a positive account of their lot. We meet Achmetjan [Akhmetjan], described by Davidson as "something of a revolutionary." This man, once a cobbler of poor peasant origins, is now Deputy Head of the local Hami [Qumul] government. He announces happily: "...generations have gone by, and we have not seen a train [...] now we shall see one [...] and it is the government of Chairman Mao that brings it" (61). Saidi Ibrahim, jailed by the Guomindang (GMD, Chinese nationalist party) as a Uyghur nationalist before 1949, is in 1956 the Deputy Mayor of Ürümqi; "a jolly Uyghur in the late thirties," he too is positive about the future (67). On a visit to the Pamirs arranged by the Kashgar local government, the author meets the secretary of the local Kirghiz government. A man who had previously fought in partisan ranks against the GMD and "that lot" [their indigenous landlord allies], he now administers several thousand herdsmen in what Davidson describes as the first practical example of "home-rule" (185). Several respondents are newly trained doctors. These include Abdel Kader, who went back to school in 1949 supported by a state bursary, and who laments the lack of proper doctors across Xinjiang (68-9); and Dr Tadayev Habibullah, who describes a dearth of medical staff and supplies in Kashgar in 1944 following the departure of Soviet doctors and the GMD's collapse in the south, and speaks emotively of post-Liberation progress: "Do you really understand what it means when people have hope? [...] When they have it like money in their fingers, like water in their fields?" (138-40). A third example concerns former serf, Ayip. As Davidson notes, the word *chakar* [serf] "acts like an open sesame" in conversations with local people (162). For Ayip, there has been nothing but good news since the land reforms: "...we saw money for the first time. And it was like flowers" (167). By the end of 1952, his family lived in one

half of their former landlord's home, owned 18 *mou* of land and an orchard, and were positive about the prospect of a stage one cooperative.

A strong theme which emerges from Davidson's encounters, but which he opts to colour as embrace of the revolution, is local relief at the return of peacetime. It appears that many welcomed change simply because it replaced wartime misery and insecurity. For Nusret Memeti and his fellow cotton goods traders in Kashgar, the general feeling is that there is now greater security of livelihood (142). In the case of one very poor woman studying at an adult literacy school in Kashgar, her husband permits her to receive an education not because he has embraced progressive gender ideals but because he sees that she can earn more if she has learning (195). At the Sinkiang Institute, Dr Aysa observes carefully: "We are making progress. Things change. People also change." Here at least, Davidson can see that in reality most people are just "pushing soberly ahead with their jobs" (67).

Finally, there are certain methodological problems with Davidson's interpretations. First, he fails to take account of the fear and political sensitivity that must have accompanied post-1949 social change. Partway into the book, he notes that scores of interviewees divided their thoughts into "after liberation" and "before liberation", and spoke of the less recent past with difficulty. This pattern he attributes to a general horror of Republican times (71). Yet one might also conclude that this tendency reflects locals' perceived (and very real) need to remain in good standing with the new political administration, by praising post-1949 social construction and rejoicing at the GMD's demise. Later, Davidson accounts for interviewee reticence by suggesting that locals see "no point in raking up the past" (purportedly because they feel so optimistic about the future) (113). Yet Uyghurs and others in 1950s Xinjiang surely perceived Qing administrators, Republican-era warlords, GMD officials and Communist cadres to be equally *Chinese*: the overlord may be new, but he has the same face.

We thus find that Hali Abak, Deputy Secretary-General of the XUAR, is deeply suspicious of Davidson's motivation in asking about pre-1949 times, although he sometimes "forgot his textbook phrases and gave us vivid pictures of those tortured years" (125). Roadze Türde, Deputy Secretary of a cotton growing cooperative, must be pushed to reveal what happened to the former landlord "owner" of a *kariz* canal, since he is presumably afraid of creating negative propaganda about communism (163). Peasants in the Ili-Kazakh autonomous prefecture, when asked what they worried about in 1956, "were not prepared to say they were worried about anything" (174). Davidson smoothes this over with the comment: "There is a limit, after all, to confidence; and perhaps they were genuinely puzzled [at the suggestion they might be concerned about anything]" (174). One must wonder whether the true explanation for their silence is quite different.

Second, the author makes frequent willing assumptions, this tendency certainly deriving from his own intense desire to see social egalitarianism realised. In Kashgar, Davidson learns from Imam Rachman Haji that, despite local clerics' initial opposition to the new government, they now feel pleasantly surprised, since it has not molested them, and things are better than before. The author observes: "How much he meant by this last remark might be hard to know [...] But he may have meant a good deal by it" (146). Certainly, the imam may indeed have meant more than he said, but what remained unsaid is surely impossible to know, and the author is too eager to extrapolate positive meaning from it. Another example of his wishful thinking comes in Yengihissar [Yengi Shähär], where he hears the (by now familiar) story of how indigenous landowners claimed *mavat* [ownership] over dug canals until the CCP freed up the water supply. On this meeting, he muses: "...if [peasants] did not always tell the truth I think they sometimes did, and often most of it" (152-55). Again, this is a questionable assumption. Although Davidson insists on the validity of this encounter, protesting that he and his companion had come upon this peasant family "by

chance” (155), it remains the case that the man would have been disinclined to speak truthfully before an audience of potentially dangerous state representatives (Tse and Mamud). Much can perhaps be gleaned from this respondent’s parting remark to his visitors: “We are friends now, the people of China, and *those who are not the people of China*” (155, my emphasis).

Third, Davidson seems prone to turning a blind eye to negative cases, in the sociological sense of examples that do not support his running theories. In Turfan [Turpan], he declares joyfully that: “To be in Central Asia now was to know the small beginnings of a new society” (100). Yet that same afternoon he had met a group of cobblers, who told him that they had been in their cooperative for only one month and that their doubts remained unresolved. In Kashgar, he describes the “speechless” editor of the local newspaper “with whom we could make no progress,” and ultimately labels him “the most careful of cadres.” It does not seem to occur to him to consider whether this man might be a rebel, someone not in accord with the political status quo.

Inner struggle for objectivity

Despite these many instances of willing suspension of disbelief, Davidson does from time to time acknowledge his inner struggle for objectivity. This first surfaces when he is still in Beijing, where he has a moment of critical reflection following a conversation with Mr Chen: did people go into [cooperative] partnership with the state owing to force or persuasion? As Chen insists that the state has used no force “except perhaps the force of circumstance” (a remark significant in itself), the author remarks: “The more I thought of it [...] the more it seemed to me one of those Chinese explanations which contain [...] the essence of deep-probing truth. But could one accept it?” (39) It is important to note that Davidson is by this stage well aware of – and struggling with – the emerging realities of failing communism in

Hungary, Poland and the Soviet Union, and thus bound to ask himself: “If a given system of ideas and action could carry others into the misery of personal dictatorship and police terror, why should it carry the Chinese anywhere else?” (40). Nonetheless, he finally opts to believe Chen, since long weeks of wandering have shown him that “the overriding fact is that most Chinese seem now to be agreed on the important issues of today and tomorrow” (41). Perhaps this is true of the limited sample to which he gained access, but beyond that? Much later, as he considers his observations in south Xinjiang, Davidson again asks himself: “Could it be as simple as that? [...] That so many should work selflessly and sensibly to improve the lot of average man?” (178) Conceding that “reality in China will strike one differently at different times,” he contrasts the smiling faces on propaganda posters and “polite rehearsals of the Party line” with (as he sees it) the candid responses of his peasants “met by chance” (178). As the volume draws to a close, he has firmly made up his mind, stating: “Their freedom is a real one [...] nowhere in Sinkiang [Xinjiang] did I come across any anti-Chinese sentiment. Non-Chinese and Chinese seemed to be working well together and on a footing of complete equality of status” (229).

A “backward” people in need of “help”

There is much evidence within *Turkestan Alive* (not to mention without) to suggest that Davidson’s conclusion was flawed. For one thing, it is hard to conceive of a “complete equality of status” in a context where Shih Chiang-chen, Deputy Secretary of the Commission for Minority Nationalities, describes the PRC’s system of regional autonomy as one in which “backward peoples could grow to maturity; less backward peoples could soon catch up with the majority of [Han] Chinese” (230). It is equally hard to conjure the notion of mutual respect when reading Davidson’s summary of Chinese anthropologist Fei Xiaotong’s analogy for language and script reforms: “...we are building a sort of railway from illiteracy

to university. Because our peoples are so varied in their stages of development, there have to be many stations on this railway, and the trains have to go at different speeds..." (241).

Davidson would go on to write passionately about the pre-colonial achievements of a culturally and technologically sophisticated African people, and contrast these with the negative influences of European colonial administrations (*The Scotsman* 2010). Yet in 1950s China, he seems strangely blind to the ethnic inequalities implicit in PRC state discourses and to the colonial nature of CCP activities at the frontier. Davidson laments that Xinjiang is a region repeatedly stripped by "the storms of war" across recent generations (15), observing: "...in Sinkiang, at long last, there was peace. It was narrowly in time. For this was a country, by now, that was dying of its wounds" (137). Yet he chooses to relate this condition less to the long succession of Han Chinese and Hui (Tungan) incursions that took place over the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, and more to the colonial activities of the Guomindang (arch enemy of Chinese Communism). Focusing predominantly on GMD rule rather than the sustained history of Chinese invasion since the advent of the Qing expansion, he describes that period as "the bitter end to centuries of neglect" and "the added twist of pain that turned poverty into squalor" (148). These "innumerable years of semi-slavery and stagnation" he contrasts sharply against CCP construction of the new society in the present, as when he remarks in Ili: "The squalor of the past still flowed in muck and mire around the islands of the future" (201).

Rather than acknowledge that current low productivity and lack of medical and educational facilities result from a prolonged period of political instability created by successive Chinese colonial incursions of all political colours, Davidson appears in places to characterise these conditions as an inherent civilisational "backwardness". On medicine, he remarks that this country "was yesterday in the pre-medical age" (69), and rejoices that newly trained doctors will "establish the promise and the possibility of medical aid [and] clear a

pathway through ignorance and superstition” (220). Nowhere does he acknowledge the long existence of traditional Uyghur medicine (although he would later write many books feting pre-colonial African civilisation).⁶ On water management, he invokes Aurel Stein’s suggestion (1903) that an earlier Tāklimaqaṇ desert civilisation had failed through lack of human means to manage, store and use water, and repeats that writer’s question: “Whence is that impulse [to manage water] to come?” In answer, he declares that “within fifty years of the writing of those words the impulse would be clear and confident” (150-51). In thus positing the Chinese communists as the sole agents capable of controlling water, he ignores ancient Uyghur knowledge and use of irrigation canals (of Persian origin) known as *kariz*. This is however a momentary forgetfulness, since he had earlier acknowledged the use of complex water courses in Bactria and Samarkand in the 2nd century BC, and also in Turfan [Turpan]: “They [local people] had practised irrigation since time immemorial; it was the condition of their presence here at all” (88). Enthused in turn by improved yields enabled by new farming cooperatives and the power of literacy to turn a subjected people into “self-respecting individuals” (157), Davidson pronounces the revolution “a pathway to the joy of living” (155) and “a most remarkable piece of social engineering” (160). In doing so, he elides the fact that in nineteenth-century Xinjiang (when the Han presence remained negligible) farmed territories were sufficiently fertile to ensure cheap and plentiful food for the local populace, so that there was no need to reclaim additional land (Warikoo 1985: 80). He also deletes a long history of formal education in Xinjiang. *Mäktäp* (primary schools maintained by mosque authorities) and *mādräsä* (Islamic colleges of further education) pre-date the Yaquḅ Beg era (1864-77), while indigenous elites inspired by the Jadidist Muslim reform movement in Russian Turkestan had begun to open *pänni* schools (which added scientific subjects to a modified version of the *mäktäp* curriculum) from the early years of the Republic of China, established in 1912 (Bellér-Hann 2008: 326-38; Millward 2007: 146-48).

Perhaps Davidson's ultimate misinterpretation comes when he exclaims: "I was watching [...] the inner growth and transformation of a backward people, the intimate mechanics of 'de-colonial' change" (160). How is it that Davidson could be so determined to see China rid of foreign imperialism from without (Britain, France, Japan) that he became blind to the fact of China's own internal colony? The reader is reminded of Maria Dundas Graham, who in her narratives *Journal of a Voyage to Brazil* and *Journal of a Residence in Chile* (1824) produces a "romance of benign domination," imaging economic exploitation in terms of cultural influence between "infant" Latin American nations and Britain, the benevolent benefactor (Soledad Caballero, 2005).

Conclusion

The subjective nature of Davidson's response to history in the making must have made very painful the eventual unravelling in Africa of so much that he believed in, especially since critics from the right were swift to condemn the early judgments he had made about revolutions that turned sour (Brittain 2010). Robert Burroughs, in his exploration of May French Sheldon's pro-Congo reportage (2010), analyses how "travelling apologists" were criticised by British Congo reformers in Britain for travelling in the superficial manner of tourists, and failing to make close contact with the peoples of the Congo River basin. Does Davidson similarly emerge as an apologist for the Chinese colonial regime in Xinjiang? Certainly, he was hampered in China by linguistic constraints (the use of intermediaries) which prevented him from winning the intimacy of local people. Moreover, the additional political constraints (state control over access to respondents) meant that his way of seeing was skillfully manipulated from without. Yet his optimistic analysis seems also to have resulted from an intense desire to believe in basic human goodness. At fleeting moments in *Turkestan Alive*, Davidson imagines the possibility that all in the new China might not turn

out well. Early on he ruminates: “No doubt it is true that nothing in society can be guaranteed [...] No society is finally good, finally static” (42-43). Much later, he qualifies his final conclusion: “...the Chinese now achieve this basis for a larger and better life not with [...] terror and coercion, but with increasing popularity [...] No doubt one cannot guarantee the ultimate result, for man is an unreliable animal” (243). One wonders what thoughts Davidson might have shared on subsequent developments in China (the Hundred Flowers Movement of 1956-57; the Great Leap Forward of 1958-60; the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76; the Tian’anmen incident of 1989) had he authored a memoir on this subject prior to his death in 2010.

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¹ Davidson's books include *The African Awakening* (1955); *The Lost Cities of Africa* (1959); *The African Genius: An Introduction to African Cultural and Social History* (1969); *The Africans: An Entry to Cultural History* (1969); *In the Eye of the Storm: Angola's People* (1972); *Modern Africa* (1982); *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State* (1992); *The Search for Africa: A History in the Making* (1994); and *West Africa Before the Colonial Era* (1998).

² This refers to GDP in the Soviet political sphere, namely weight and value of produce, where 61 *poods* are equal to 1 ton.

³ On these revolutions, see Forbes (1986) and Benson (1990, 1991, 1992).

⁴ *Renmin ribao* [People's Daily] reported in 1953 that continued local resistance in the Northwest was due to CCP cadres 'lack of respect for the religious beliefs of the national minorities, or for their customs, habits, languages, or writings' (Bush 1970, 271).

⁵ They include Achmetjan, Deputy Head of the local Hami [Qumul] government; Saidi Ibrahim, Deputy Mayor of Ürümqi; Dr Aysa of the Sinkiang [Xinjiang] Institute; Dr Abdel Kader, a doctor attached to the new, state-run Ürümqi Hotel; Niadze Mehmet (mixed Uyghur-Hui descent), Chairman of the Turfan [Turpan] Municipal Council; Hali Abak, Deputy Secretary-General of the XUAR; Dr Tadayev Habibullah of the new, state-run Yarkand hospital; Nusret Memeti, member of a cotton goods cooperative; Imam Rachman Haji of Kashgar's Great [Heyt-gah] Mosque; a male peasant near Yengihissar; Roadze Türde, Deputy Secretary of a cotton growing cooperative; Ayip, a former serf and member of a peasant cooperative in Turfan [Turpan]; Rapijan, an official from the Agriculture Department of the Yarkand government; Tohsun Sultan, member of a silk-weaving cooperative in Yarkand; the local government secretary of a small Kirghiz district in the Pamirs; Mei Miao, ex-Officer of the Red Army and 'leading cadre' in the Kashgar local government; Hassan Khan, government secretary of the second district of Chaosu; Sadat Beg, Head of Administration of one county in the Ili-Kazakh autonomous *chou*, and Midin Aqsu, one of his deputies; Jahanov Abdullah, Director of the Chaosu cottage hospital; a Kazakh man who manages the state trading company for Chaosu county; Lu Li-shu, cadre and accountant at the Chaosu county headquarters; Mahsud from the Chaosu county tax office; Ismail, Head of Public Security in Chaosu; Mehmeti Min [Memet Imin], Secretary of the Kashgar district government; Sa Kung-liao, Director of the state-run Minorities Publishing House in Beijing; and Fei Hsiao-t'ung, social anthropologist at the Central Institute for Nationalities.

⁶ Traditional Uyghur medicine can be traced back more than 2,700 years in written records. According to the theory of Traditional Uyghur Medicine (TUM), diseases or impairments result from an imbalance between the four body fluids: blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. TUM herbal formulations can cure diseases by regulating the balance of the body fluids (Yishakejiang, Abudureyimu, and Abulake 2005).